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ABSTRACT

These four early childhood education conference papers discuss ideas and themes to create healthy educational environments inspired by preschool sites in Reggio Emilia, Italy. The first paper, "Environmental Visions: Daisies and the Possible" (Alma Fleet and Janet Robertson), discusses the influences of Reggio Emilia. The paper notes how the environment of a center should fit its image of children: as learners and researchers; in constant relationship with their surroundings; as being capable of long investigation of media; as being able to solve important problems; as social beings; as entitled to beauty; as welcome; and as engaged in learning. The second paper, "Melbourne via Reggio Emilia" (Kerrie Trebilcock), concerns the culture of a private early childhood center in Melbourne, Australia. The paper notes how the center's culture was presented through its physical environment such as interior and exterior architecture and design, and suggests that the design of early childhood centers should: create a conducive environment for learning; provide children with a sense of achievement and ownership in the environment; and allow children a degree of freedom. The third paper, "Packing the Suitcase: What To Pack?" (Margo Hobba and Tony Hobba), presents the authors' experiences designing an early child care center in Geelong, Australia, inspired by their Reggio Emilia experience. The fourth paper, also titled "Melbourne via Reggio Emilia" (Diane Bourke), concerns refurbishment of the Junior School of Melbourne Girls Grammar in Australia. Includes a profile of conference speakers. (LBT)

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ED 432 362

UNPACKING EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENTS

VISIONS FROM REGGIO EMILIA, AUSTRALIA, SWEDEN, DENMARK AND THE UNITED STATES

A. Fleet

A selection of papers presented at the Conference

16 May 1998

Institute of Early Childhood
Macquarie University

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Unpacking Educational Environments

Conference Papers

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Unpacking Educational Environments

Introduction

These papers represent a microcosm of thinking about educational environments, and as with any thought on paper, it is only a blink in our evolving knowledge about educational settings for learners. Never intended as a recipe, these thoughts are about journeys taken. The link between all of them is the image of the child: the child as learner, thinker, member of a community, a child entitled to the very best and a child entitled to adults who acknowledge this.

These papers, when presented, were supported by plentiful visual material. In the after event, just writing about environments without visual material is challenging to say the least. Using a range of devices, each paper endeavours to describe the now invisible visual material without detracting from the original words and impact.

To orient you to the messages which follow, we would like to share a story. While visiting the St Louis schools, our taxi driver mentioned we might like to visit The Library Bookshop. As we are avid bookworms, this came second on the sights to see after the botanical gardens. After glorying in the sights and smells of a northern Hemisphere spring in the gardens, we came to a rather unprepossessing gigantic square concrete building. But its bland exterior hid an Alladin's cave. In a clever shift in conceptualising what book shops should and have looked like: musty, folksy, or like a supermarket with tables piled high with seconded books, this shop was heaven.

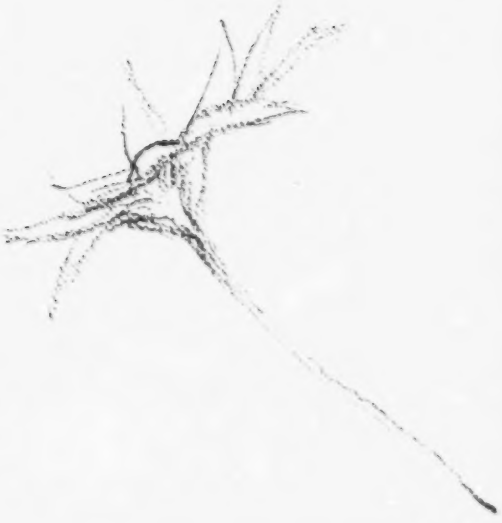
Each major category of books was given its own space and furnished to enhance the essence of the books housed there. Therefore the Mystery/Thriller section was divided into small 'rooms' with Persian carpets, dark wooden shelving and wing armchairs and side tables, so one felt you'd walked into a Sherlock Holmes study complete with fireplace. Soft lighting and muted tones set off the ambience.

The architecture/design category had several severe rooms with Bauhaus leather chairs and chrome reading lamps. The children's section had a large castle wall dividing the space from the entrance, with cosy spots for children to read in its battlements. A large coffee shop/restaurant complete with reference books to help youngsters complete their homework became the only place we ate out. Needless to say, in our several visits there we spent a fortune!

What, you may ask, has this to do with an introduction to papers presented at a conference about educational environments? It has to do with the power of an environment over the people who dwell within it. The book shop owners decided readers would like to muse over their choices, would like comfort and mood enhancers, would like respect and time in which to make choices. They therefore designed an environment which suited those purposes, rather than one which fit a stereotypical mould. These owners were astute. We can also be astute, educational environmental creators if we take the time and courage to think - who uses this environment and what can it offer?

We invite you to join the discussion.

Alma Fleet and Janet Robertson
Editors



Environmental visions: Daisies and the possible

Alma Fleet & Janet Robertson

We know that some of you have studied in Reggio Emilia and others have barely been introduced to the name of this Northern Italian town. Some of you have been to workshops or conferences or read widely about the work of these impressive educators. Today we are not introducing the history or impact of the ideas emerging from Reggio Emilia, nor are we highlighting the key principles. Many of you are familiar with them. We hope that those of you who are not will follow them up in other times and places. Today is an opportunity to focus on just one aspect of the early childhood experience which has been highlighted by the 0-6 services in Reggio Emilia: the critical importance of the environment.

We all today face a difficult challenge. It really is impossible to single out one part of education, such as environments, from the whole system or milieu of education. Without supportive teaching styles the best environment will fail; without an understanding of what the purpose of education in a particular setting is, teachers struggle. The list goes on. We are going to draw a long bow this morning in a brief introduction. Environments are visual. However the 3D visual reality which is an environment, is derived from notions, beliefs, values and influences which can be entirely intellectual and heartfelt. The shape of this lecture theatre is derived from the educational cultural belief that you (the listener) need to listen to the person standing here (at lectern), and not have windows to look out of if things get boring. This image we have of learners influences entirely the environments we create for learners. Here are three images of children within environments: three infants naked in a nest, five infants in flower pots and finally an image of a toddler looking at leaves through a magnifying glass. Which one reflects the image of a thinking sentient being? Beliefs about children, be they populist or educational beliefs, all influence the choices we make about environments for young children. Bear this in mind as you steep yourself in the cornucopia of environments you'll see today.

Why does the environment matter?

Personalising this a little may help the concepts resonate. The media is a good place to start, as popular culture often reflects things about a society which we do not fully acknowledge ourselves. Many of you may remember Melanie Griffith in *Working Girl*. She played the role of the secretary in a broker's investment office who really wanted a chance to be boss. She wanted who she was, and what she was capable of, to be recognised. After both male and female bosses took advantage of her, she took control of the situation (and of Harrison Ford), and realised her dream - but the point in this context is this: in the course of the story, "Tess", the Griffith character, moves office twice.

In each case, she unpacks a bag of the things which she is bringing to the new space. Each time, this unpacking involves a personal photo, a book, a gift from her partner to put on the empty desk. Hollywood is an extraordinarily long way from Reggio Emilia, but Tess's actions symbolise what we all want to do - to be in a space which says, "I live here, I belong here, my voice is heard here, images important to me matter here". This visual valuing of the people who inhabit particular spaces is one of the environmental elements we would like to stress.

Let's look briefly at the way this message is achieved in a few of the settings we have visited which have been affected by the influence of Reggio Emilia. This message is best conveyed visually. Those who attended the conference will have the images in their heads; this summary can only act as a reminder of the power behind the eyes. (The italics may help move you into an imaging frame of mind.)

Let's start with some Australian images from Melbourne. We are sure there are others who have interesting environments too; we look forward to opportunities to be invited to share these with you as well.

In this first centre, *there are lockers which have children's faces looking out rather than commercial butterfly and clown symbols.* In another, *there is an entrance way where an accordion display of children's face photographs welcomes you to the space and then surprises you as you walk past it by a reverse display of the children's drawings of themselves seen from the other side of the accordion folds.*

Throughout our visits to places influenced by Reggio Emilia, we saw the photos of the children being used in a range of ways, often available for small photo-reduced copies to be used freely by the children as signs of authorship, or photo-enlarged as the covers of portfolios. They are an asset for the message-writing tables, helping beginning writers shape a letter with a photocopied greeting photo and signature photo as place-holders while young writers are learning the letter representations of names. In our earlier way of thinking, we might have considered these mini photographs simply as 'resources', and so they are. In our expanded thinking, however, we also see them as part of a teaching environment, an environment which invites a type of activity and learning because of the way it is offered, structured and/or presented to children.

We visited a *class where children proudly take the card figures of their photographed selves to use in their play or to remind them of a friend absent for the day. These people figures may also be used as markers of ownership next to a piece of construction.* In other Melbourne spaces, *there is a staff wall where photographed faces, profiles and children's interpretations are displayed. Everyone who lives in the space has a right to see themselves reflected in it! A related idea is on a "memory board" in another centre. A present day staff photo is "wool-linked" to childhood photographs and "I remember" statements of life in their childhood. These images have nurtured conversation with staff, children and parents about shared memories and interesting differences which all contribute to the human face of the centre.*

Another valuing of the people present is seen in the entrance board in a Danish preschool - images chosen by staff and children that were important to them were presented in neatly framed collages which gave an image of the richness of the whole person in the context of their families. And in Hamersby in Sweden, there is a toddler wall of large black and white faces laughing out from winter scarves and beanies. But they are a surprise too, hiding behind clear overlays of plastic sheets with geometrical designs creating another view of each child. Little stools in front of the display invite children to stand and lift the pages to look at other versions of themselves and their friends.

This brings us to the moment where we pause to look carefully at the entranceways into these spaces. An entranceway should not be a *through way*, rather it is a *philosophical statement.*

The Italians have taught us that entranceways matter. They:

* tell us who lives in this space and what relationships these people have to each other,
* they tell us what is valued here,
* they either invite us in or warn us out,
* they provide an opportunity to share with the community our beliefs about the nature of teaching and learning,
* they give a glimpse of the ambience which pervades the rest of the space.

Many of you know that the entranceway in the Diana school in Reggio Emilia, for example, contains pictures of the staff and explanations of the program. Perhaps more importantly, it contains a statement on the rights of children which have been devised by children in the school, working with their teachers. The notion that a school has, as one of its key purposes, the investigation and protection of the rights of children may be a novel one for some of us, but it is valued in that setting.

That setting also has one of the most famous images from Reggio Emilia which those of us who know it celebrate and those who have not yet met it can marvel - *a central piazza, play space, greeting and gathering area in the middle of the centre. This also includes the transforming area which we might call "dress-ups', where children disappear in the wave space to take on another identity and re-emerge as someone else.* This space is shared across the rooms which open up onto the piazza and invites the conversation which typifies the real piazzas in the town.

Let's look at (think about, recreate) a few more images here to help us reflect on entranceways in our own contexts.

There's a Melbourne reception area, with large rounded wicker chairs inviting you to sit by the small wooden table. The flower arrangement says that this is a cared-for space which you can rest in if you are waiting to meet a staff member. The use of natural rather than institutionalised furniture conveys messages about the types of interaction which are likely to take place here. In one Danish centre, there's a lovely wooden sign-in centre; perhaps it used to be an old high top desk. Or there's a Swedish elementary school presenting itself through clean lines, light and varied textures. The floor to ceiling tile graphic represents the valuing of things genuinely artistic rather than merely functional.

And back to Melbourne - *to a centre where a table with its cheerful background (one of those inviting pieces of wrapping paper freely available) has a photograph of a family respectfully framed and the day's events written up in an open folder for families to peruse as they bring in or pick up children.*

We, of course, all believe that that there is a rationale for what we do. We would probably all also accept that our work is based on our fundamental philosophies - about life, the nature of teaching and learning and so on AND on our perceptions of ourselves and our image of the child. Let's consider the implications of our beliefs. The *credo* might look something like this.

If we expect children to behave respectfully to each other, we are respectful to them.

If we expect children to engage patiently with their work, to pay attention to detail,

then we must pay attention to the details of the rooms which surround them.

So what might these respectful details look like?

You may know the Reggio Emilia image of a treasure table, a carefully displayed collection of shells and pebbles sorted by shape and size, presented with a vase of flowers, mirrored reflections and images such as the leaning tower of Pisa; images to provoke thinking and perhaps new ways to deal with the materials presented.

or

You might visualise a Danish centre with a clean comfy soft couch which is a powerful metaphor for inviting sitting together rather than passing through, or a Swedish documentation panel, aesthetically and professionally presenting an analytical record of the process and products of children's thinking and creating. These items celebrate communication as well as being purposeful.

At Höjden in Sweden, you might also see unusual corner shelving created by making an awkward corridor angle into an effective clay display. In this centre, you would also see inviting table activities including home-made face puzzles created with the children's enlarged photographs laminated onto three dimensional block surfaces.

Such care generates engagement, the totally involved activity which demonstrates young children's capacity for concentration, fascination and investigation.

It also generates the productive study evident in a Danish year 2 class. These children had become fascinated with cloud patterns. *Their subsequent study transformed one section of their room, so that in addition to the cheerful little vases of flowers which set the tone for their environment, they also had suspended clouds in swatches of variegated blue pale to dark blue drapes of cloth above their tables. Their writing was also displayed.* In addition to the scientific and poetic investigation of the sky/cloud relationship, they had been encouraged to explore the aesthetic dimension.

An environment which looks like it has been created with care will be more likely to generate pride in the work undertaken there, in a willingness to tidy up. Unsorted bits tipped in a box do little to invite careful construction or design. We saw some astounding Lego work in the country which originated Lego, mainly because - in addition to there being so much of it - it was all separated by colour and shape. Children could plan what was needed and effectively find the pieces they wanted.

Teachers have always had an eye for valuable teaching resources; now that detective sense is extending to environmental resources which support the aesthetics - the cane basket instead of plastic tubs, the clear glass instead of yoghurt containers, the solid colour drapes rather than the tizzy little cartoon animals on curtains. Some educational suppliers have done us a great disservice by training us all to buy primary coloured plastic tubs. They're one step better than ice cream containers, but certainly do not contribute to the children's developing sense of a colour aesthetic.

But are we just talking about looking good? Are these frills simply decorative touches which we cannot afford in these stringent times? Does it matter what colour the furniture is or how much clear space is available on the walls? Yes.

If we believe in the power of the environment to influence us, it does matter. If we believe that the environment is a teacher simply by being there, that a statement is made which we are learning as we live in the space, then it matters.

Visualise in Melbourne *a school library designed from a refurbished preschool, which is semi-circular, with light coloured wood and large glass windows bringing the surrounding bush environment into the experience of curling up on the large cushions provided to encourage a quiet read, while on the other side of the room, computers and carrels are available for the other activities encouraged in a library. There is no clutter, no sagging notices, no ripped covers, no neglected scraps of paper or pencil stubs.*

A useful strategy to retrain ourselves here is to step back from the hustle bustle of the space we live in and look at it through someone else's eyes - even take a photograph. It can be very sobering to suddenly become aware of the pictures becoming ragged around the edges or half falling from the wall. The message portrayed may not be what we had thought we were encouraging.

Another critical aspect of environmental effectiveness is the human dimension. If we believe that the relationships between people are key to learning, we'll create environments which promote those relationships. We will look around to see:

A room in a Danish child-care centre where adults holding babies are chatting to each other and the babies, moving from the over-stuffed chair to the cushions, moving off to attend to other children, then returning to their comfortable interaction.
or
In a Sydney school Kindergarten, you will see a small group of boys and girls clustered around a toy wooden washing machine, peering in to examine the turning mechanism and talking animatedly, with arm movements to supplement their different home languages.

These important environmental relationships extend beyond the school room. If we see the child as a learner within a family, we'll involve that family physically and emotionally in our work.

We might be fortunate enough to develop a climate like that in the Prampolini centre in Reggio Emilia where we saw *three generations of people laughing together at a large wooden table, making cappelletti, the little pocket-style filled pasta used for special occasions*. I particularly like the image of the preschooler with his head resting on his *Nona's* shoulder as she chatted with his mother and their hands flew across the pasta tray. The member of our study delegation who had come along intending to ask how they managed parent involvement, surveyed the scene quietly while tears ran down her cheeks. The respect and warmth of community relationships was palpable.

You can see that we're talking about spaces which are *lived in* not just *inhabited*. In addition to the sense of the people within them, these spaces we are trying to create have a sense of the "philosophic aesthetic".

I find this an impossible phrase to define, but it is so delicious that it's worth savouring for a moment. "The philosophic aesthetic". These are the words of Elena Giacobbe, who is the

Pedagogista who spoke with us at the Neruda School. Those of you new to the ideas from Reggio Emilia may not yet know that all these premises are called schools in order to recognise that young children learn from birth, not that a school has the feel of an institutionalised setting. You'll also know that the pedagogical adviser, the pedagogista, is a key person in the collaborative network across schools.

Back to aesthetics. We tend to not think in terms of aesthetics being integral to education. Indeed, there is nothing at all aesthetic about many of the places in which our young children spend their days. Perhaps if we return our attention to the larger spaces we inhabit, we might regain a sense of the local aesthetic.

Consider the arches which typify Reggio Emilia - and which are reflected in many of the buildings we visited. They are part of the visual dynamic which shapes the way children view their world. Then think how monumental sculpture in our environments fulfils a similar function. You may know the importance of the large ancient lions in a piazza in Reggio Emilia and the work which children have done studying those symbols of the town and its history through patterns of shadow and light, drawing and clay sculpture.

In Australia we may think about our own heat and light and the impact they have on our spaces. *You might see the effective use of large playground sails to protect children from the blazing heat, or the provision of large covered verandahs.*

And some of you know the Donvale Campus of Carey Grammar in Melbourne where the school has a resident artist who works with the children to create communal sculptures which become part of the life of the school. Mind you, this campus has a delightful resident Labrador who is part of the guide dog program, so it has its own set of unique characteristics. Sculptured settings, from a Dreamtime serpent to a Chinese festival corridor to a large spiritual tree quilt, are part of the shared experience in this environment.

For our guide to the local aesthetic - we can 'breathe in' the spaces around us. If I may briefly turn to some schools in New York City, which knew nothing of Reggio Emilia when I visited several years ago, we can see the rich potential for building on whatever our environment has to offer.

For example, The Manhattan New School was created by a literacy inspired Principal (Shelley Harwayne) from a building which had been closed earlier due to local social difficulties. It is now a thriving (indeed a sought-after) public school environment which looks loved and valued and which is a safe haven for all within. The Principal's *credo* for the school might be stated as *"I am proud to be a literate New Yorker"* and everything within the school environment supports those beliefs.

There is a focus on alphabets as an art form as well as a literacy tool, as seen by the large quilted alphabet in one hallway which displays the children's suggestions from local icons (R for Rockefeller Center, W for walking the dog...). There is a valuing of reading which is seen in the drive to collect books and integrate them throughout the school. There is no library here; all the books are divided into genre collections and distributed to places such as the poetry loft where children go to sign out and return their own books. The environment reflects the schools' belief in its children, and it is amply repaid.

Or we might visit a private New York school which has worked closely with the Bank Street Early Childhood Teacher College. The lobby greets you with portraits of the staff painted by the children. The children have to go to City Park to play, *so their local bit of the concrete jungle is brightly painted with city art scapes to show that graffiti is not welcome. Classrooms have sophisticated block building structures and graphed representation of the multi-level structure of the school.* The 'look' is not mass-produced; it is locally relevant, constructive and purposeful.

So where do we look for inspiration in our environments? Those in the city could do well to think of their colleagues in New York, building on a street alphabet. Those in the bush may see grass lands and features that aren't available to us in the city, but we all have access to things that grow...*a child feeding lorikeets, a watchful kangaroo, bottle brush flowering and iris...*

In trying to unpack the concept of the philosophic aesthetic, remember that, the presence of mirrors does not guarantee a reflective program, and while we muse about what is possible, we can all plant daisies.

Earlier, we had been discussing the probability that many of you attending the conference would have no money in your coffers to make radical structural changes to your early childhood environment. How could we offer you some hope to take away? Well, daisies cost nothing, they grow from cuttings, are cheerful, beautiful, easy care and make a difference, both inside and outside. Changing an environment is a journey which makes a difference, whether it is to put a vase of real daisies on the lunch table, or to build a new school; the reasons why you have done it make the journey important.

An educational setting should be a meeting place for ideas, a place for the exchange of ideas. What do innovative settings look like in Australia, Sweden, Denmark, US and Italy? In the practice of education, we consciously and unconsciously refer to beliefs and philosophies (Bruner, 1996; Spaggiari, 1997). There is a link between the image of a child, the notion, the idea we have of the child as learner, which a school, community and teacher holds of a child, and the educational environments which grow around such an image.

In the schools of Reggio Emilia, this link is clearly articulated. For instance, their philosophy that children have a right to express their ideas and thinking visually, has led to the development of the atelier or visual workshop. Each school has this dedicated space/room in which children can explore thought visually in the company of their peers and a supportive but intellectually provocative adult.

These rooms are filled with natural light, and large working spaces at both adult and child height. Paper, paints, drawing materials and brushes are arranged enticingly and readily available. Previous thinking is visually represented on the walls. Upright easels, solid working surfaces for clay, a kiln and an aesthetic arrangement of everything characterise these rooms.

In Denmark, there is a strong cultural love of the outdoors. This has translated itself into the "Nature schools" or nature groups for children 3-6 years. Twelve extra children are added to a regular child care setting. They leave the centre with two staff, a knapsack and warm clothes each day at 9am and retu :ing about 1pm. Nature schools may only have a reception room

within a larger setting, where children are left and collected by parents, then they board a specially equipped bus and head for their nature site, spending the whole day there cooking on fires, making cubbies, climbing and so on. The land actually belongs to the Nature school. It is by choice it remains without buildings. This happens winter and summer, except when the temperature goes below -12°C.

In the 1970's, Swedish child care expanded at a time when there was concern that separation from mother was to the detriment to the child. To allay this, centres began to look like homes. The correlation between imitating home-like environments and replicating the supposed better experiences children had at home, was irresistible. Some centres took on the look of a family home, complete with the chaos of a large family. Some Swedish educational bodies have now begun to question this. They realised that the potential to teach within these settings was eroded by the very nature of the environment. Typically with small rooms, cluttered organisation of equipment and a freedom for children to do what they like, when they liked, the environment seemed to exclude the role of teacher. At Höjden pre-school in Stockholm, situated in a large block of flats, and occupying one flat, the problem of small rooms and disjointed environments was tackled. Squeezed for space in which to teach, the environment was modified, such as widened door openings to make rooms visible from another room. *The addition of a block platform made it possible to preserve the block structures from accidental 'run bys' and the lighting says, 'build here: it looks great'. Further work stations were constructed where it would seem to me there was no room at all. In a space about 1m x 40cm a small drawing/writing centre was established. It has two chairs, narrow shelving above the desk holding well ordered and aesthetically arranged materials so that instead of writing materials scattered throughout the flat centre, it is now concentrated in one place.* The teachers have reclaimed pedagogy by changing their environment and their image of the child.

In Denmark, woodwork is highly prized as part of the cultural heritage. One teacher said to me "Children must know how to use a saw, it is real". Hence, woodwork rooms with an extensive range of real tools feature in schools. *At Vejle, one wall of the woodwork room is filled with a shadow board of woodwork tools such as fret saws, chisels, planes, hammers. Several work benches each have vice and clamps.* All the tools are real, some child sized, others adult sized. A sense of order and the smell of wood shavings permeates the space.

We are not saying that you need to build an atelier, nature school, flat or woodwork room. We ARE saying that both articulated and un-articulated beliefs and images of children drive environments. Therefore we need to examine our philosophy and image of the child here in Australia. Put simply, does your educational environment support your educational endeavours? Does your environment fit your image of children as learners?

What does your environment say about your image of children? Does your environment reflect a living space for educating communities? Or is it anonymous and peopled by phantoms? (Giacopini, 1997; Rinaldi, 1996). Are there images of the children who dwell within your environment, showing them growing and learning? At Mia-Mia (Sydney) *images of each child in perspex frames sit as a group at the entrance to each room.* In Hirstsals (Denmark), a birth - two years centre, *plate glass inserts in the slate floor display photos of the children, alternated by safety mirror glass inserts, offering children and visitors the opportunity to regard the people who dwell there.*

Does your environment support an image of the child as researcher? Does it have elements of

provocation or chance, in the belief that such ripples in the waters of intellectual complacency have endless educational possibilities? (Giacopini, 1997). *At the Clayton Family Centre (St Louis, US), 18 month old children look at a hermit crab with a magnifying glass.*

Does your environment support an image of the child in constant relationship with their surroundings? Do you create permanent learning centres in the belief that children learn best through repetition and long periods of time? *The Mia-Mia toddler block corner is an established space, protected from interruption by shelving.* Similarly, *St Michael's School St. Louis (US) has a computer/drawing centre removed from the hurly burly of the rest of the room, and children elect to work there.*

Does your environment reflect an image of children capable of long investigation of media? Does it assist children to spend time learning, lingering over problems, working for months with a team of child researchers? *In Reggio Emilia, an atelier is the space in which four five year old girls have been creating a forest, each tree created out of clay. This forest is the result of weeks of discussing, modelling, drawing and visits to forests.*

Does your environment support an image of the children who solve important problems, create ideas and test hypothesis? Does it say, "these children are clever, look how they are thinking?" Are there traces of this thinking on the walls? (Giacopini, 1997), (Gandini, 1997). Does your environment have a trace of history, of memories? (Giacopini, 1997). *In Höjden (Sweden), a large display of children's examination of growing plants is on the wall. Each child's words, and thoughts are placed next to the work, so it is possible to see the theories the children are constructing. At Mia-Mia a large shelf has been constructed near the toddler room door, to hold documentation of extended investigations.*

Does your environment reflect an image of children as social beings, entitled to spaces which support small group interactions, in the belief that children learn through social construction of theory? (New, 1990; Rinaldi, 1996). *Underneath the documentation shelf in Mia-Mia is a curtained space in which children can hide, play with torches or engage in games. In Reggio Emilia, a cut down wooden wine vat has become a comfortable conversation pit in which infants can be within a relationship.*

Does your environment reflect an image of the child as one who is entitled to beauty? *A secret path at Mia-Mia winds its way to a small cubby created out of creepers, with sandstone paving steps and portals at each end. In Reggio Emilia, a display of autumn produce sits on a low shelf, inviting touch and investigation. In Vadum (Denmark), a pine antique child's bed with a swathe of mosquito net above it is the home corner bed.*

Does your environment welcome children? Does it reflect an image of children discerning enough to acknowledge ambience? Is your environment serene and calm? Does your environment look at the soft architectural elements, such as lighting, sound and ambience knowing that these elements change the nature of learning? *The College School St Louis (US) home corner table has a lamp in front of a small mirror. There is a lattice arch delineating the space from the rest of the room.* Play in this space is thereby 'different' - the space and ambience dictates this.

Does your environment support an image of the children engaged in learning, derived from their interests, over long periods of time? Does it give them space to do this away from the

hustle and bustle of playroom/classroom life? (New, 1990). *Toddler musicians work in peace, and the noise of their drumming does not invade the play of other children when a separate space is used at Mia-Mia.*

Does the image of the child pervade the whole environment including marginal spaces such as bathrooms and lockers (Gandini, 1997)? Bathrooms in Reggio Emilia are pleasant spaces to be. Sometimes bottles with coloured water decorate the windows, sometimes photos of children are used instead of locker symbols. *Shells and children's visual interpretations of water adorn one small shelf next to the toilets. In the College School (St Louis, US) a mirror surrounds the bubbler, which itself is surrounded by photographs of the children.* In the Model Early Learning Centre in Washington D.C. (USA), documentation and photos describe the interactions children have in the bathroom. *In Mia-Mia, a wreath with beach combing treasures is hung over the nappy change table.*

Close your eyes and ask yourself, is your environment an advocate for the right for children to have the very best? (New, 1997). If not, grow some daisies on Monday, and while they're growing, start your journey with an investigation of your image of the child. Any changes in your environment will reflect your new image.

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Melbourne via Reggio Emilia

Kerrie Trebilcock

I once heard Carlina Rinaldi say in her fantastic metaphorical way that we cannot copy what we see in Reggio centres because each centre plays different music as they have different orchestras. I think that establishing or recognising your OWN identity is important when you are thinking about making changes to your environment. So before I talk to you about the changes we made in our environment, I want you to know a little bit about our identity.

As my presentation was a very visual one, I apologise to readers that I cannot provide you with the images that accompanied my words. Each of the symbols represents a colour slide that was available to the conference, which cannot be reproduced here.

Physical Structural changes made to the Pre-school.

I was employed 4 years ago and when I first began the building was just starting to be built. I did look at the plans when I was employed, but architects had already designed the building and I was only able to make some small changes. These were mainly aesthetic changes – colours of carpets – they had chosen dark burgundy which I felt was too overpowering, and also the addition of a staff toilet. The architects had assumed that staff in the Early Learning Centre would be able to access the adult toilets in the gym which is adjacent to our building, but outside our gates.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT:

- I work in an Early Learning Centre which is part of a private school.
- There are two campuses and I work at the Patterson River Campus which is situated on 95 acres of reclaimed wetlands.
- The student population is about 250 which ranges from 3 year old kindergarten to Year 8 currently. Next year we are adding Year 9 and 10. Students currently move to the Brighton campus to complete the rest of their schooling.
- The nature of our outdoor environment is that we experience very hard dry land in the summer and very wet muddy land during winter.
- The campus offers a small farm that was built by the students and is maintained by the students as part of their environmental education. We keep chickens, goats, sheep and a cow. There are plans underway to build and maintain an animal nursery in the central courtyard which will be maintained and used by the younger students of the school as well as the older students.
- We also have a lake which encourages an abundance of bird life and until recently different varieties of fish. We have had a problem with carp, and they have managed to eradicate all of the other fish in the lake. The dry conditions of summer dried out the lake and there are plans to put a variety of fish in the lake when the rain comes.

These factors are very important when considering the 'culture' of the school.

What we started with

We started with an enrolment of 17 children which was a mixed group of 4 year olds and 3 year olds (about half and half). The Prep class in that year was an enrolment of only 6 students and the school enrolment consisted of about 180 students. The school council had decided to add the Early Learning Centre due to the demand of parents and also in an attempt to boost enrolments in the lower part of the school.

At this time I had attended the conference at Melbourne University entitled "Reggio Emilia – Realising the potential of children". Although I had been totally blown away with the Exhibition "The hundred languages of children", and I was very interested in the ideas and philosophies of Reggio Emilia, I was in a new school with new staff who had never worked in a kindergarten setting before, and so I had many challenges other than the challenge of Reggio Emilia to contend with. As this was a new program and I was new, I also had to prove myself to the school community. There also wasn't a huge amount of information available on Reggio at the time and I didn't know anyone who had been over there.

Having completed my first year at the school, the opportunity to visit Reggio Emilia surfaced late in the year and I decided to go and find out more. When I returned from Reggio Emilia in January 1996, I didn't quite know where to start, so I decided to change my environment. I already had the room, to which I couldn't make any structural changes but I wanted to make changes which reflected my revised Image of the Child.

I will elaborate on other changes that I made, (which don't cost a lot of money, but require thought as I reconsidered my image of the child) and that I continue to make in the room in the afternoon workshop with Diane.

Early in 1997, after another visit to Reggio Emilia, the headmaster approached me with the news that due to the success of the program and again requests from parents, we might have the possibility to add a new centre which would run a three year old kindergarten program. I was asked to think about some designs for this new building.

Then the opportunity arose to travel to Denmark, Sweden and the States to examine how the philosophies of Reggio Emilia had influenced their environments and their programs. I jumped at the chance. I was also very interested to see how their cultures influenced their adaptations of the Reggio Emilia philosophies.

I sat down with staff when I returned and showed them many slides that I had taken while away and asked them to think about what we really liked about our current environment and what we felt we wouldn't replicate in the new room. Unfortunately, as we were racing against time, parents and children weren't asked what they would like in the new building.

After many discussions, this was the list that we came up with.

<u>Ideas for the planning of our building</u>:

- We wanted a room which would link the two kindergarten rooms. It was based on the piazzas that I had seen in Reggio Emilia and also in Denmark and the States. We wanted

this area to foster and support a sense of community and support social interactions and relationships across ages. We wanted to set up a number of dress up experiences and dramatic play experiences.

- We wanted this room to be able to be used for a number of purposes. We wanted it to be a room that we could change according to what the children wanted and to provide more experiences for the children to explore. We wanted to provide experiences to provoke children, for them to be able to view things from different perspectives, for them to be able to have discussions in this room away from the noise of the main room.
- We wanted to provide lots of mirrors which would encourage children to interact with themselves.
- Specialists. Being part of a school means that we also have access to a number of specialist teachers. We thought that the specialist teachers could come over to the Early Learning Centre and hold their lessons in this room rather than us having to take the group over to the school. We also hoped that this would be less disruptive to the group and that children could choose to go into the specialist lesson if they chose to.
- We also wanted this area to be available for the After School Care program. The After School program was being held in the 4 year old Kindergarten room and we were finding that we couldn't leave any activities out on tables, because although there was close supervision in the program, the older children were inquisitive and curious and often moved things around and they weren't immediately accessible to our young children the next morning.
- Sliding doors save space and restricts accidents.
- Blinds must be lined so that the area can be darkened.
- Furniture must be moveable.
- We wanted the kitchen to be centrally located if possible. Kitchen should be sunken so that it is accessible to children.
- Block steps to be made for both rooms with storage underneath.
- We wanted a staff room where we could collaborate, socialise and relax.
- One of the things which was a major concern was that although we had an abundance of natural light, with windows on each side of the building, there was only one pinboard in the room to display documentation. We wanted to provide lots of pinboards to display projects and to keep families informed about their childrens' daily activities. We wanted pinboards to communicate both indoors and outdoors.
- We wanted windows between the rooms to provide transparency between the rooms. This was an important consideration for the bathroom which we also wanted to be centrally located as our Victorian regulations stipulate that children and adults must be visible in the bathroom from the main room.
- We also wanted a separate art room fashioned on the "atelier" that I had witnessed in Reggio Emilia to provide a place for research.
- We wanted our rooms to reflect our culture and the schools ethics.
- We wanted lots of storage space.
- We wanted space to display 'found' objects and objects to provoke children.
- We wanted a fabulous OUTDOOR environment which would reflect the same values we had for the indoor environment.
    1) We wanted a large sandpit with large rocks concreted under the sand for children to dig and discover.
    2) We wanted a smaller sandpit as well which would be more private for the younger children or children who wanted to have some privacy.
    3) We wanted swings.

4) We wanted to be able to use our jumping slide.
5) We wanted a mud patch.
6) We wanted paths for children to be able to ride on
7) We wanted lots of grass for children to roll on, build on, run on, and so on.
8) We wanted a vegie garden.
9) We wanted a fixed picnic table to sit at and make cubbies over.
10) We wanted opportunities for documentation outside.

It was around this time that I had discussions with the headmaster, on behalf of many parents who had expressed concerns about the Preparatory year. Many parents had expressed concerns about the lack of continuity with the program offered in the Early Learning Centre which is was totally different to the program offered in the Preparatory area.

I did a presentation to the School Council on the importance of the environment. There had been discussions at this time as to whether or not we could add a Preparatory room to the Early Learning Centre as well to provide a lot of continuity between these year levels.

The day after the presentation to the School Council we received word that they had approved the buildings and the funding. However we didn't have much time. Plans had to be finalised fairly quickly so that building could begin before the end of the year.

Staff discussed these ideas with the headmaster and then with the architects. Our architects then presented us with a floor plan. We reviewed this plan taking a number of factors into consideration.

We invited our Human Services supervisor into the centre and asked her how she considered this plan in light of the new regulations which would be implemented in a couple of months. She informed us that one of the proposals would include the stipulation that the children must be able to viewed when they are in the toilet from both inside and outside. Many schools in Victoria have security cameras in their rooms when their toilets are located away from the main room. If we did not relocate our toilets it was a possibility that we would have to do this outside. The only workable solution was to relocate the toilets to where we had planned the kitchen as the 'piazza' as this room is all glass. This directly conflicted with our idea to have the kitchen centrally located but in the long run it was the most workable solution.

What we ended up with

As the slides demonstrated,

- We ended up with our Piazza. This room is used for specialist lessons.
- It is also used for the After School care program.
- We were given blinds in both the kindergarten rooms but as of yet, we don't have blinds for the Piazza.
- Our kitchen is not centrally located and our regulations stipulate that children are not allowed in there.
- We got our staff room which is a place where we do socialise and chat and eat our lunch. We use it for planning meetings and staff meetings.
- We have many more pinboards.
- We have loads of storage space.
- We didn't end up with an atelier but we will work on that in the future.

- ❑ We were given more storage space both indoors and outdoors and changed the location of the lockers.

Conclusion

Before I changed anything about my environment, I reflected on some of the following questions:

1. Have I created (or how have I encouraged the children to create) a conducive environment for learning?
2. Have I found out what the children already know? Have I found out what the children want to know?
3. Will the children frequently experience a sense of achievement in the environment?
4. Will the children sense a degree of ownership in the environment?
5. Will the children sense a degree of freedom
   - to choose?
   - to experiment?
   - to learn from mistakes?
   - to set their own goals?
   - to work at their own pace?

Reflecting on these questions will help you contextualise the decisions you make about your own environment.

GOOD LUCK IN YOUR THINKING.

Packing the suitcase: what to pack?

Margo Hobba and Tony Hobba

Introduction (Margo Hobba)

We have called our paper "Packing the Suitcase: What to Pack?" because what you pack will depend on the destination of the traveller. The contents of the suitcase will be very different if you are going to Surfers' Paradise or to Antarctica. So it's the same with formulating a brief that will guide the development of a building for young children; what goes into the brief will depend on where you want to go.

Anyone who has worked in environments for young children, be they kindergartens, childcare centres, infant welfare centres or schools will know how important the built environment is to the quality of the program and the behaviour of the children and the adults. Sadly, this experience is often one of having to manage in an environment which is inadequate and poorly planned. We might have experienced those long multipurpose kindergarten rooms where a raised voice echoes off the walls and ceilings jarring nerves and resulting in the evil eye sent from a frazzled teacher to an offending child. Or we might have worked in a childcare centre where staff disappear behind mysterious doors into invisible rooms not to be seen again until they leave them at the end of the day. The rooms in question, are generally small and overcrowded resulting in a myriad of behaviour problems in both adults and children, behaviour problems generally seen in a range of animal species living in overcrowded conditions.

What we may be less aware of, however, is how high quality built environments for children can add to the quality of the educational program as well as positively influencing the behaviour of the children and adults who work and play there. In Reggio Emilia terms, we may not have been lucky enough to have worked in an environment which was the 'third teacher'.

Over the past few years, Tony and I have had the opportunity and pleasure of working together with early childhood professionals to design and construct some child care centres in a way where the environment assists the educators in enhancing their program. When we talk about 'design' here, we do so in the broadest terms, for design refers to the creation of beliefs, visions and actions about and for children, and the creation of spaces which support and encourage these.

It is difficult to live with a passionate person for any period of time, without 'catching' some of it. Tony has a passion for space. For years I have listened to discussions about 'fluid' spaces, human spaces, sculpture in buildings, the need for beauty, scale and context. For years, Tony has listened to discussions about children – their unrecognised potential, their curiosity and drive to learn which seems out of step with an education system bent on producing sausages of equal size and weight. So simply through the process of many years of co-habitation, Tony became an architect with an educational language, and I became an educator with an understanding of space. So the exciting thing for us in this work has been the opportunity to collaborate to put our shared passions into practice.

After many heated collaborations about the best way to explain the interface between education and design, two disciplines that seem to have languages foreign to each other, we finally decided to tell you the story of how one centre grappled with this problem. We will then explore in some detail the way an educational goal or vision can be translated into a building design response.

City Central Child Care Centre is a 60 place centre in the middle of Geelong, and is affiliated with the Apostolic Church. The centre has been created in an old garage with most of the work done by volunteers from the Church. When the committee decided to expand the capacity of the centre, the Director, JoAnne Spicer, had her heart set on an indoor active play area for all those stressful rainy days. She was talking to a colleague about it, who said, 'you want a piazza, talk to Margo Hobba'. JoAnne and I began to talk about Reggio Emilia programs and I made a presentation to the teachers, parents and the Community Services Adviser about the philosophies that underpin the Italian experience and the way this influences the environment and program.

This talk was a turning point for the centre. I have often wondered why, of the many talks I have given to early childhood educators about the Reggio Emilia approach, it was so embraced by the City Central community. I have some thoughts about this: firstly, the church link meant that the staff, committee and some of the parents were already part of a community, ie the community of the church. So for them, the notion of building community into their centre was a principle they easily embraced. The second factor was JoAnne Spicer's commitment to children; a commitment which drives her to be an advocate for them at many levels, from the political to the careful management of toilet training. A third contributor was JoAnne's passion for learning about children, both for herself and her staff. She is forever reading books and articles and she makes sure her staff also keep up to date with current literature. The City Central staff (qualified and unqualified alike) participate in a wide range of professional development. The final piece of the puzzle was the fact that the Community Services Adviser was involved in the process from the beginning. This is significant, because when it came to the actual design of the building, Tony was pushing the regulations into unknown territory. Many crucial elements of the design would not have been passed had Bev not understood and supported the educational principles which underpinned them.

In the past, the centre Management Committee had seconded the services of an enthusiastic volunteer to 'draw up some plans' which everyone would then build at nights and on the weekends. It became clear that if the centre was going to build an environment which was a true response to an educational philosophy and practice, the committee would have to engage a designer who would understand these and be able to translate them into spaces. And so Tony joined the team. This consisted of JoAnne Spicer, the director, who was trying to integrate her own beliefs and experience with the challenges posed by Reggio Emilia, me who prodded and challenged her and her staff to examine their image of the child and the way this drove their program, at the same time being challenged myself not to fall into the trap of trying to recreate Reggio Emilia in Geelong, and Tony who was trying to translate these often fluid ideas into lines on a page, driven from behind by a team of volunteer builders keen to 'get on with it'.

Architectural response (Tony Hobba)

To put this project into some context for you, it is in Geelong, in a commercial area near the centre of town and in a recycled motor vehicle workshop building. One half of the building had been operating as a 60 place centre in a single learning space.

Stage 2, the one Margo and I developed, was in the vacant front half of the building. So it was off to the first meeting with a client group who had been enthused by the images and potential of Margo's Reggio Emilia talk. Well, when I arrived the builder had already started pulling things down and erecting some things that were not really very clear or understood. So I sent him to work demolishing something away from the central area just to buy some time to get a feel for the project.

Starting from the outside, we began to discuss the opportunities and constraints of the building. We focused on:

the context of the building, ie what do we want it to say?
how do we address the building, ie what will the experience be like arriving?
what will you see when you get inside?
what options / messages will you receive as you explore the building?

We then expanded this to explore the broad planning issues of:

context
address
physical comfort
space planning
connectedness
relationship between inside and outside

As the builders were already looking over my shoulder, waiting for the plans, we started with the entry. We discussed arrival, separation, departure, security, ambience. I remember the builder retired at this stage with a comment like 'let me know when you've got something!' I retreated to produce some design responses reflecting not only the functional needs but taking on board the aesthetic and sensory opportunities.

This process continued for the balance of the project, with the main functional elements, such as, learning spaces, studios, kitchen and dining, toilets and amenities, places of dialogue and landscape. So each space became an experiment based on the new dialogue – no longer 'what are we going to build?' but 'why?'

The landscape plan was designed with natural materials, primarily a place of inquiry, freedom and contrasts - dead tree trunks and shade trees, digging patches and bike paths, quiet places and eating patios and space for change and evolution.

Internal colours were chosen to reflect the shadows cast by the sun on the walls and the floor - air conditioning ducts were suspended loosely throughout the rooms, mirrors added to reflect and distort.

Every day the construction process became a design process and a day of surprises. 'What can we do with this?' became the cry.

The latter parts of the project were completed without drawings. The director, the builder and I met every second morning and with this open ended agenda we discussed the issues, explored the possibilities and scribbled a resolution on whatever was handy.

On review, now that the building is occupied, the building seems to work well particularly as a backdrop to the activities and ambience created by the staff and the children. It is an enclosure that creates an environment. It allows choice, freedom and comfort – a pretty successful building. The main reaction I receive when I take visitors there is that it's hard to believe that there are 60 children there. 'Where are they?' I am asked. 'They are absorbed', I say.

(Margo Hobba)
The collaboration at City Central continued and continues beyond the development of the building. It was not long before the educators realised that their glimpse of RE had unsettled their practices so that they were questioning everything they did. We managed to organise a work place training program, funded by the Gordon TAFE, and over several months I worked with the City Central staff to examine philosophies and practices in the light of challenges raised by RE. This is another story in itself which is ongoing.

(Tony Hobba)
We have developed our approach with several other projects that we would like to share with you.

1. Adelaide

The Adelaide job was really triggered by a visit to City Central by a group who were in the process of designing their own centre. After a heady meeting with JoAnne, Margo and myself, the client left with a challenge to really try to understand and articulate the way they would work with the children in their proposed new centre.

I visited the site and prepared a site analysis and collected data about regulations, site conditions, natural features, and so on.

They tabled a design as an expression of their needs and wants – an Australian homestead. We were asked to review this solution. By referring them to our predesign process it became very clear that they had no understanding of communication within the building. A quick tour of Reggio Emilia, and they were in tatters. The result of the process of collaboration has produced a unique building form which will promote a sense of community amongst its inhabitants. The group had decided to call the centre 'Arky'. I adopted the metaphor of a collective journey and chose to arrange the elements in the symbolic shape of an ark. It fitted the topography of the site and the image was immediately recognised and seized upon by the prospective users.

2. Geelong bayside

Nestled by the Corio Bay, the challenge was to renovate and refurbish an existing centre by using the basement carpark, under an old bowling alley, and relocate a section of road, just to add a bit of interest. Well, we drew on the maritime theme of the bay to give this difficult site a sense of context. The piazza becomes a boardwalk, colours reflect the seascape, water tracts across the paving and sprays out of bollards. The delight in visiting the centre for me is the sense of contrast in outdoor and indoor environment from the hard interface at the entry. Once inside, the orientation is always towards the sky and the sun.

It is interesting to reflect on this building, because it was the only one where a building was designed without a predesign process of challenging attitudes and beliefs and articulating these as the foundation for the design. The building design was based on our own knowledge, beliefs and attitudes about children. However it was clear from the start that these were not clearly understood or shared by the occupants. While the new building has certainly taken the stress off the staff who were previously working under very difficult conditions, the educational practices continue unchanged. This confirmed for us our previous conviction that a successful project is one where the educational vision and the design vision are expressed as a whole.

3. Greensborough

Set in the hills east of Melbourne, in a suburban environment, but on a large site, this project involved designing a 120 place centre. We did our thing - talked to the client groups about the image of the child and the way this would influence the final design of the building, using Reggio Emilia as an example. We explored the nature and value of environments. We designed a 120 place centre, organic, bushy, open, a celebration of their own natural environment. Economics dictated a reduction to 60 places. We responded with a design for a smaller building based on the same aesthetic. It will never be built.

This seemed to us a most desirable outcome. Once pushed to actually consider the children who would occupy the building, their potential, their needs, their place in the community, the client began to realise the huge responsibility he was about to take on. As an income generating operation, it was all too hard.

Educational Visions and Building Design (Margo Hobba)

One of the exciting things to emerge from the Australian interest in things Reggio, has been the emergence of a new dialogue about the language of buildings and environments and an articulation of our own, previously unconscious awareness about the link between the quality of the building and the quality of the educational practices within it.

The first stage in the design process then is to help the client to think about and clarify how they want to work with the children in the building, not how the building will work. To kick start this process, we make a presentation to the potential users of the centre (teachers, committee, parents) showing the way Reggio Emilia have used the environment as their third teacher. We have found this to be immensely useful as:

- the children's work is a symbol of potential previously considered unthinkable and impossible by many adults,

- the beauty of the Reggio Emilia centres and the careful articulation of principles helps the client realise the link between program and building, and

- clients suddenly become excited about the possibilities of designing a building that might really contribute to the development and well-being of the adults and children who will work there.

The second stage of this process is to move away from the impulse and enthusiasm to recreate Reggio Emilia in Australia, and to get down to the hard work of articulating a vision that will guide the concept for this particular community. This vision then becomes the reference point for the myriad of design decisions that are made in the process of creating a building for young children.

We thought at this point that it may be useful to take three critical educational principles or visions that have emerged through our discussions with other colleagues and with teachers and parents and then to explore the way these have informed the design process. These principles are: communication, engagement and aesthetics.

Communication (Margo Hobba)

Human beings are essentially social animals. We need to relate to other human beings. So it is no wonder that the isolation experienced by childcare workers is one of the greatest contributors to burnout in the profession.

Theory and research in the fields of psychology and education point more and more to the importance of 'groupness' for both psychological well being and for learning and development.

* Social-constructivist theories of Lev Vygotsky and others reinforce our own experience, observation and intuition that knowledge and understanding are gained through observing, modelling, discussing and arguing with other people.

* Ecological models of development such as that of Urie Bronfenbrenner articulate the place of the child in family, society, culture and history, ie the force of the wider community on our development and growth.

The children from the schools in Reggio Emilia show us how working on meaningful investigations in small groups helps them realise their potential.

In Reggio Emilia, we see how collaboration, trust and communication between children, teachers and parents, leads to the development of meaningful relationships and the creation of a community of investigation and learning.

Architectural response (Tony Hobba)

With this understanding, the building must accommodate the needs for all occupants to communicate informally and formally. The Reggio Emilia image of the funnel/phone (a hose,

with funnels attached, which allows children to talk between two rooms) has been a powerful image for our clients in recognising the need to provide children with their own communication networks and devices. The message we learn from Reggio Emilia is to provide every possible opportunity for communication in all forms.

We have interpreted these principles in our projects with :

* open and visual communication between rooms,
* the provision of internal streets as places of dialogue,
* dining rooms,
* studio spaces, and
* a landscape design that provides both passive and active zones.

The need to become involved in meaningful work (Margo Hobba)

Anyone who has worked in a centre for young children knows that frustration experienced by both children and teachers when constructive activity has to be interrupted. In kindergartens, short sessions and multiple groups force children's work into brief bursts of energy, suddenly terminated by group, snack or home time. In long day care centres, the perceived need for variety and novelty as well as the logistics of eating, sleeping and working in the same room are equally limiting.

Most early childhood educators are well aware of children's ability to become immersed in a project that captures their imagination, to concentrate and persist for extended periods of time, and to become 'obsessed' with ideas to the extent that they are explored in all areas of the program. We have all seen how a trip to the fire station for instance, leads to a rush of drawings, constructions, discussion and dramatic play concerning the nature of fire, firemen and firetrucks.

There seem to be two main factors which limit the opportunities for Australian children to develop these natural abilities:

1. The educators' image of children.
2. The design of spaces for children.

For many of us here, our drive to provide children with the opportunities to become connected and immersed in their own learning is often frustrated by the buildings in which we work.

Architectural Response (Tony Hobba)

I have taken the position that children in long day care centres will be performing a variety of tasks, of various scales, of various degrees of difficulty in various sizes of groups.

Traditionally, the architectural response has been to provide a large barn and to move things around as required. With a real appreciation of program, spaces can be tailored to meet the demands of each particular centre. So we have included within our projects, small studios where children can work without interruption and where work can continue over days and weeks, performance spaces, internal streets for meeting, promenading, chatting, ironing, or hiding and dining rooms. Home rooms now become smaller being one of many options

available to children in the centre.

Aesthetics (Margo Hobba)

One of the most telling clues to our culture's image of children is in the aesthetics of the environments we create for them. We see rooms decorated with Disney cartoon characters. We see artificial grass in their playgrounds because it's easy to clean. Plastic cups and plates are provided for drinking and eating, so that they won't break. In the home corner, one often finds a motley collection of assorted tea set equipment and maybe some plastic fruit, often dinted and out of shape. In fact, my experience of child care centres is that equipment and environment is usually guided more by the principles of durability and hygiene than any other consideration.

Our cultural belief seems to be that children don't notice the quality of the environment. And yet I wonder, because they notice everything else, the ant in the sand pit, the helicopter flying past, the bruise in the apple. They are particular about design too. Watch how carefully a child places painted lines on a page or a block on a block construction. In my work, I visit many kindergartens and children's centres, and I am continually struck by the different behaviour and energy qualities of children in centres where staff have taken the trouble to create beautiful environments. I have no doubt that a great deal of this is to do with the caring and respectful nature of the adults per se. However we also have no doubt that both adults and children are greatly affected by the quality and aesthetic of the built environment and interior design.

As educators, it is important to ask ourselves how much we reinforce or extinguish children's natural fascination with detail, curiosity about the natural world and appreciation of beauty.

Architectural Response (Tony Hobba)

With each building I look for an aesthetic appropriate for that building and its inhabitants. This in turn informs all the future architectural decisions for the building. It is in essence the language of the project. It is often a very personal dialogue that produces the key. For example, I drew on the maritime theme for the Geelong bay project to give this difficult site a sense of belonging. Details such as water in the playground, sails, colours taken from the seascape, have produced a recognisable palate as a foundation for the expression of the occupants.

The Adelaide centre was to be run by a Christian group who had already agreed to call the centre 'Arky'. I chose to arrange the elements of the building in the symbolic shape of an ark. This image was immediately recognised and seized upon by the potential users.

The building aesthetic comes from how it looks, how it feels, how it's put together, how it's finished. You get a sense of delight when the building responds to the seasons. You can equally create mood and surprise in the larger and smaller spaces.

When one views the Reggio Emilia centres, one is struck by the quality and respect given to all spaces, building elements, objects and equipment in them. From an architectural perspective, this means that each detail must be considered in relation to the way it contributes to the overall experience of being in the building. For example: when it came to paint in one of our

centres, I chose 5 colours, and walked around and marked on the walls the sun patterns at various times of the day – to be recreated through the paint colours. The result is that the paint colours enhance the light and shade characteristics of the building at various times of the day. Small mirrors set into out of the way corners have provided interesting havens for discussion and sitting.

To give the building as much internal activity as possible and to demystify the building and promote inquiry, I have used flexible air conditioning ducts, simply suspended from the ceiling with wire. The importance of providing children with opportunities to play with the natural environment is reflected in landscape details which include billabongs, watercourses, vegie patches, water tanks with gravity feed hoses, deciduous shade trees and public and private spaces.

Conclusion (Margo Hobba)

Well, it's now time to pack the suitcase. What are we going to pack? With great thanks to our Reggio Emilia colleagues as well as to Australian educators and planners with a shared passion for children, there seems to be three essential items your will need to put at the top of your pile. For each of us these will be different in texture, colour and shape. However the essential items remain:

> An image of the child as having rights as well as needs. An image of the child as rich in potential and driven by curiosity and desires to find out about the world. An image that understands the child's need to relate to other children, adults and the environment.
>
> An image of teachers as learners who are interested in children and keen to understand their uniqueness. An image that sees teachers as having rights as well as needs – rights to develop and relate and to be respected for the huge responsibility they carry.
>
> An image of the family as being the dominant force in a child's life, whose role as teacher must be recognised, celebrated and enhanced.

The final decision then is to choose a bag most appropriate to contain these precious items. Some might choose a soft, comfortable sausage bag, others might prefer the smooth clean lines of a Gucci case, or even the utilitarian supermarket plastic bag. Our belief is that none of these will really do the job because they don't account for the special shape of each item. What Tony and I have tried to do is to design and make a suitcase that is the best fit for the items it contains. So while each of them will have a similarity and familiarity, because they contain the same items, each suitcase will also have its own unique quality to reflect the unique qualities of the travellers.

Melbourne via Reggio Emilia

Diane Bourke

Hurt no living thing:
Ladybird, nor butterfly,
Nor moth with dusty wing,
Nor cricket chirping cheerily,
Nor grasshopper so light of leap,
Nor dancing gnat , nor beetle fat,
Nor harmless worms that creep.
Christine Rossetti

At the beginning of 1997 I took up my position as Head of Morris Hall, the Junior School of Melbourne Girls Grammar. Today educational best practice demands that the modern primary school environment cultivates a warm, cooperative, family type atmosphere. Its more informal methods emphasize hands-on, practical experiences while play and activity far outrank passive listening and regimented movement through inflexible routines. Whole class instruction too, gives way to individual pupil, or small group learning. I was immediately provided with a challenge. The building I inherited was built in 1966 and is inadequate for such practice. Thanks however to a very supportive Principal and School Council, our sixties building is to undergo complete refurbishment late in 1998.

I was fortunate to visit Reggio Emilia in 1996 and join a study tour to the US and Scandinavia last year. Amazing environments have inspired me. I deliberately use the word inspired, however, because Reggio Emilia does not offer us a recipe to copy. In fact Carlina Rinaldi warns us against this. There is certainly a great danger in believing someone else can discover for us what suitable environments are.

Only recently I visited the National Gallery in Melbourne and came across a French artist, Alfred Mannessier who painted earlier this century. He once said in an interview, "My pictures aim to express something my own heart has experienced and not to imitate something my eyes have seen". This too was to become my challenge.

I have spoken to many colleagues as I've been reflecting on what constitutes an exemplary educational environment and each of them, in various ways, has further challenged my thinking. Social exchange is seen as essential in learning in Reggio Emilia and so it has been for me too. I recall John Nimmo, in 1994 expressing the term "Io chi siamo". Roughly translated this means "The I Who We Are". It expresses the idea that within this shared space of "we", each person can offer his or her best thinking, leading to rich and fertile group exchanges, stimulating new and unexpected ideas to occur.

Schools must hold visions that are uniquely theirs. Lella Gandini speaking in St. Louis last year, said, "In creating an overall educational setting it cannot be imparted, it must be created on site". In line with this I have been forced to reconsider my values and reasons for

refurbishing our Junior School.

In the first instance we are rather like Alice, cast adrift in Wonderland. "Cheshire Puss, would you tell me please which way I ought to walk from here?" "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to", was his reply. As a group we, also, had to work out where we were going, and why we were heading that way.

Today, I think it is fair to say, we are beginning to hold a common vision and endeavouring to make many connections within our learning community as we embark on a cooperative learning journey. We are certainly aware that we are dealing with living spaces, spaces for educating communities, and not anonymous scholastic environments as is so often the case when one talks about schools. I am further heartened by the words of Loris Malaguzzi, "The future belongs to those who are able to bring together in a school the strengths of criticism, democratic participation and imagination".

There is a clear message that comes from the educators in Reggio Emilia and indeed rings true for anyone who has spent time truly observing and co-constructing knowledge with young people. Our colleagues in Reggio Emilia talk about the rich, strong and powerful child. Whilst I think I understand what it is they are expressing, I am a little uneasy with the translation as it is open to many interpretations. I would rather spread the word that all children have immense innate potential. An added responsibility occurs here, however, because once we admit to having seen these potentials, it is our duty that we not only unleash them but also help others see them too.

By holding this image of the child, it is essential that we create the best possible environments for them, environments that are beautiful, inviting and stimulating, environments that communicate and speak many different languages. Otherwise, we represent badly, the nature and potential of children's capabilities. It is interesting too, that as we discover these potentials in children, through this continuing discovery, we will find the potentials within our selves as educators. Loris Malaguzzi has commented "If we limit children, we limit ourselves".

Clearly too, at Morris Hall, we understand that all children do not learn the same way. I would like to think in our classrooms students have the choice of "how" to go about learning as well as which investigations they would like to do. Classrooms can no longer be structured to accommodate only one learning style. Frank Smith noted that the most difficult kind of thinking is that which is imposed by someone else.

Providing choice for students in the classroom has been made more possible, thanks to the theoretical work of Howard Gardner. Gardner, a developmental psychologist from Harvard University, claims that there are at least seven intelligences and everyone has a genius in one form of intelligence over another. Of course, everyone needs to develop intelligences in all areas, but most schools only teach to linguistic and logical (mathematical) intelligences and many students are left behind. Howard Gardner's theory regarding Multiple Intelligences has serious implications for designing school environments and has become one of my guiding stars.

Come wandering briefly with me through Morris Hall to gain a glimpse of what we are trying to achieve until our refurbishment takes place later this year. [*visual images not available here*] As students, parents, staff and visitors enter our building it is important to me that they

gain a welcoming feeling in an atmosphere of serenity and discovery. Moreover, we hope to give an overall impression of the richness in the quality of activities that take place in our school.

I try to produce not only a beautiful and joyful environment but also endeavour, on another layer, to help our children and staff find beauty and joy in the learning journeys they create together. I have a dream for all the girls at MGGS and to articulate it I will turn to C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. At one stage the White Witch offers Edmund Turkish Delight, a confection that once savoured creates a craving for more and yet more. (Maurice Saxby has helped me to see this as joy.) So too I hope learning will become for our young children, as it would seem to me that there is no higher point to be reached in education.

When in Sweden last year, Professor Gunilla Dahlberg spoke with us at length. During the course of her talk, she mentioned that when the Swedish child entered a Swedish school the Swedish school child is born. It would seem our expectations of children or the type of questions we ask them can so easily limit them and deny them their right of realising their potential. This being the case, how particular we must be about the environments we construct and the activities that we offer with them.

Instead of having our mission statement represented merely by the written word I am gathering together a collection of photographs that will also explain, in another language (photography), what we are attempting to achieve. I like to create layers of meaning (as in the discussion above about beauty and joy) but also try to convey that meaning in different languages, (especially with our increased awareness of Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences).

> *Come, climb stars with me*
> *And help me build great pirate ships*
> *And paint golden sky castles in sand*
> *And spin fairy tails of pink silk thread*
> ..... *And I'll make you a rainbow!*
>
> *Robert Louis Stevenson*

You will often find poetry displayed on our walls. Poetry attempts to catch in words the commonplace pleasures, power feelings, sudden insights and revelations and can often encapsulate what it is about children and learning I am trying to achieve.

Similarly, I am always happy to have works of abstract art on display. Empty of references to the material world and overt personal expression, these paintings are completely open to the multiple experiences and condition of the person who stands before them.

I have no problems displaying articles on the walls that are not the work of the children. Similarly I am not happy to display the work of children unless I believe the child has given it

her best effort, whatever the level is, of course. Mounting the children's work beautifully sends a message that shows the value we place on the children's creations and placing displays where you least expect to find them also adds interest. Displays and objects should always be constructed to challenge thinking or to engage and then fire the imagination.

I am keen to bring the outside in. Children must understand that learning does not only happen once they enter the school buildings. We are fortunate to be situated in a street with beautiful autumn trees; we have gathered the leaves and created a display with them. I am keen that the displays are not always what they seem on the first glance. My intention here too, is to help children search for and discover parts of their world that may risk remaining hidden.

TO AUTUMN

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness!
Close bosom friend of the maturing sun;
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eaves run;
To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core.

John Keats

Inspired by our colleagues in Reggio Emilia in their study of current research in many disciplines, we have spent time looking at the latest research in brain compatible learning and individual learning styles. I like to think of intelligence as a function of experience rather than immutable genetics. Current research suggests that immersion in a rich environment causes the electrical/chemical "soup" of the brain to wake up; the result is an enlargement of neurons and the growth of dendrites. Physiologically, this results in a "denser" brain and intellectually this build up results in a greater ability to problem solve. I must not be too definite here because I am aware that knowledge is always changing, but for the present, this definition suits us as we continue to seek ways to construct rich environments for our students, environments which truly awaken the entire nervous system. With this in mind, we have classical music playing whenever possible, place oil burners in safe spots and have displays that can be handled, to bombard several senses at once.

Isabel Allende, in her new book *Aphrodite, a Memoir of the Senses* begins by writing, "Walking through the gardens of memory, I discover that my recollections are associated with the senses". I hope this will also become the case for our young students.

It is important for me that our environment is full of fun, fantasy and magic. Malaguzzi quoted Bronfenbrenner, "If upbringing is to be successful you need at least one crazy uncle that astonishes" and Bachelard, "If pedagogy is to be good you need a joker in your pocket". This was certainly reiterated by Gunilla Dahlberg. We have a clock that sings a different birdsong on the hour, two frogs that croak as you pass by and a wooden pet magpie that furiously flaps its wings as the wind blows. A painted iron cat peeps through our front door and last year our

wonderful playground tree was the home of 150 3D bats.

Like our colleagues in Reggio Emilia, I have come to view the environment as another teacher. Our environment teaches on a number of levels and I deliberately think of the messages I wish to convey. I am always on the look out for inspiring quotes to place on our walls. My favourites at the moment are "Little girls who dream, become women with vision" and "Education is not the filling of a pail but the lighting of a fire".

> *If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?*
>
> *P.B. Shelley*

Similarly, documenting children's amazing thinking for all to see has a very positive spiralling effect on the children themselves. Documentation also instructs parents and gives teachers many ideas to further reflect upon. Our junior primary classes always have on display a daily letter to parents that presents an outline of each day at school. I am always keen to have a display that directly teaches our parents and visitors in the school.

Despite having talked about bombarding the senses with stimulation, I am extremely conscious of cluttering our environment. I visit so many schools that have amazing displays but I am overwhelmed with a feeling of "enough is enough". We must be so careful of not losing the aesthetic.

I think of Lucy Calkins when she wrote "The artist's studio, the researcher's laboratory, and the scholar's library are each deliberately kept simple so as to support the complexities of the work in progress". Less can definitely be more.

I would like to briefly share with you our plans for our refurbishment. The elements that are most important for me are

- Meeting/waiting/withdrawal area overlooking our attractive playground
- Withdrawal rooms/areas for small group work
- Enlarged drama room for whole school celebrations
- Glass covered walkway to avoid disruption to classes
- Mini ateliers where possible
- Light filled art room/atelier/laboratory (Wildfell)
- Widened corridors/piazza possibility
- Increased display possibilities, boards and lit cabinets
- Interesting lighting
- Change rooms with attractive lockers
- Ample Storage space
- Unusual shaped windows
- Sky lit dome to the atelier/research room
- Library/Resource Room.

At present our library is my greatest concern. For me the library must be as central to our school life as the atelier is in Reggio Emilia. Good literature provides a potent source of vicarious experience that fires the imagination with sensory and emotive images to provoke imagined experience. Its importance cannot be overlooked. The wider a child's range of experience, the greater will be her store of language, to think with, and to fly with. I am convinced of the value of stories for children. Paul Hazard put it metaphorically "Give us books say the children, give us wings". The bequest of wings should be the obsessive aim of anyone who claims to be an educator and it is for this reason alone that our school will boast a spacious, warm, light filled, cosy environment that our girls can come to at any hour and curl up with a book.

He ate and drank the precious words
His spirit grew robust,
He knew no more than he was poor,
Or that his frame was dust.
He danced along the dingy ways,
And this bequest of wings
Was but a book, What liberty
A loosened spirit brings!

Emily Dickinson

At this point in any paper it is customary to get a conclusion. However in this case there can be no conclusion. Best possible environments will continue to evolve as we re-visit and reflect on them. Indeed, we would be guilty of self-delusion or arrogance if we were to think we were capable of designing the perfect learning environment. And so what we have is a challenge, a challenge to continually develop learning environments to allow both the teachers and the children in their charge to fly. If we can achieve this we will have done what we can to ensure our successors are well placed to build on our foundations and continue the process for future generations.

Profile of Speakers

Diane Bourke
Head of Junior School, Melbourne Girls Grammar
Diane visited Reggio Emilia in January 1996 and also joined the Study Tour to St. Louis/Scandinavia in April 1997.

Dr Alma Fleet
Associate Professor, IEC
Alma Fleet has always been passionate about the learning of teachers and children. She has taught in three countries, written several books, studied in Reggio Emilia and continues to learn from her own children.

Margo Hobba
Margo has a diverse background in Early Childhood. She is the Coordinator of the Children's Museum at the Museum of Victoria and was involved in the *Hundred Languages of Children* Exhibition.

Tony Hobba
Tony operates an architectural practice near Melbourne. He naturally embraced the approach to the environment adopted by the educators in Reggio Emilia and has recently designed several child care centres inspired by the Reggio Emilia experience.

Janet Robertson
Toddler Teacher, Mia-Mia Child and Family Study Centre, IEC
Janet first visited Reggio Emilia in 1992 and as a result of this and subsequent visits, she returned to teaching to explore the implications first hand.

Kerrie Trebilcock
Kerrie currently works at St Leonard's College, Melbourne and has visited Reggio Emilia and the USA, Denmark and Sweden to study how other countries have interpreted some of the Reggio Emilia philosophies.